The Gathering Storm
Mark 2:1-12
February 21, 1971

It was another hectic day in the sea-side town of Capernum. Jesus had returned from a brief trip to the other Galilean villages in the area. And once again the crowd gathered outside the house of Simon Peter, where he had taken up residence. On this occasion, four men had carried a friend who was paralyzed in the expectation that this amazing new teacher could affect a cure. But the crowd was large - too large for them to push their way through carrying a stretcher. So they went up on the roof, and after doing considerable damage, lowered their friend down through the opening into the presence of Jesus.

An interesting, if somewhat irrelevant sidelight, to this event is the fact that they would have had to tear up the roof to get the job done. Somewhere in my church school experience I got the impression that there was an opening in that roof. Not so, say the men who know. Palestinian roofs were constructed either with tile on a wood frame, or branches and mud. And one scholar suggests that Peter's friend Mark, who preserved this story for posterity, did so because he knew the anxiety it caused for the home owner.

In any case the gimmick worked: it caught Jesus attention. He was impressed with the persistance of the men and their confidence. He said to the paralytic: "My son, your sins are forgiven:" an odd statement to be sure, in that they came because of paralysis, not sin. Yet, there is no question that in their minds the two were related. Physical illness, they believed, was simply the outward manifestation of a sickness of the heart. And so to forgive a man his sins, was to banish the cause of his illness. Obviously, if he thought this way too, he very well may have experienced an instant and miraculous cure. So far so good.

But in the house, along with the Capernum people were several scribes, who immediately would have taken mental note of the fact that Jesus of Nazareth had just put himself in the place of God by saying something which was the sole

prerogative of God and was, therefore, clearly and flagrantly guilty of blasphemy - which offense was punishable by death according to Leviticus 24:16.

Jesus knew they were there, sensed what they were thinking, joined the issue, pronounced the man healed as well as forgiven and the incident was closed, except for the fact that a rather important question of authority was left unresolved. There are, you see, several significant issues in this short story.

For our purposes this morning I would call your attention to these three. This rather basic conflict occured very early in Jesus public ministry. In terms of Mark's Gospel, we are dealing with the second chapter. In terms of time, Jesus at this point, had just begun. He had called several men to follow him, made a short trip to a few villages, done some teaching and healing, and found himself in significant conflict with the Scribes. Second, this conflict is the first of a series of five related in Mark 2 through 3:6. In addition to this instance of legal blasphemy he encountered conflict and official opposition for sitting at table with sinners, not fasting, plucking grain on the Sabbath, and healing on the Sabbath. It seeem evident that the author, in placing these incidents in sequence, is trying to tll us something; something basic about the conflict Jesus encountered. Third, in all of these instances the conflict is not with the forces of evil, not with immorality, sin and vice; not even with the governmental authorities; but with the religion, and the pious, pure, self-righteous, respectable adherents of that religion.

"The Gathering Storm", I have titled this, because that is what I sense the Gospel writer telling us. It is necessary, that is to say, to see the Gospel story in the crucible of emerging conflict between Jesus and the established religion.

Let's spend a minute thinking about that. The Scribes were based in Jerusalem. They were the official "teachers" of religion, and the official interpreters of the law. The Pharises, in comparison, were the laymen; the

disciples of the Scribes, the devotees to the Scribal interpretation of the law. The fact that several Scribes were there; that they had traveled from Jerusalem to Capernum and arrived early enough to get a front row seat inside the house, sounds very much as if they were there on business: an investigating team, perhaps, to check out the disturbing rumors coming from Galilea in recent weeks.

The Scribes were astute men. And they sensed immediately the threat to their own position posed by Jesus. Their authority depended on their credibility in the eyes of the people - something that had never been challenged before. Their power depended on the people playing by the rules - the rules they created and interpreted. Under their careful jurisdiction the historic faith of Israel had become a very formal religion of law, intensely legalistic. And they had just seen a man with the arrogant temerity to suggest that a crippled man and his needs were far more important than their rules. Very much of that kind of thinking and they would be out of business.

Now to bring this into the present tense, the subject of institutions and their integrity is of great interest today because of all the talk about the "establishment". "Establishment", of course - like the Middle Class -, is a phenomenom to which other people adhere, and its definition depends on who is doing the talking. For me, the word - by itself - has very little meaning. But I would suggest to you my sense of what is being indicated when the establishment is held up in order to be knocked down. I sense that an institution of any society becomes an "established" institution when its primary objective becomes self-preservation rather than the goals upon which it was created in initially.

Consider mythical organization X; formed for the express purpose of feeding hungry people, a noble and honorable goal. A steering committee is formed, sub-committees go to work, an organizational style emerges, personnel are hired to get the job done and hungry people are fed. But shortly a subtle change occurs within the institution. More and more effort is devoted to the

perpetuation of the institution and less and less to feeding hungry people. At that point the institution has taken to itself a kind of divine-right-to-exist, and suggestions that it is no longer viable, or even that it needs changing, come out sounding like rank heresy, disloyalty and subversion.

It happens, almost mystically, to every institution from the military super structure the purpose of which is to defend the nation, but which comes perilously close to replacing the Department of State - and which becomes paranoid at any suggestion that its goals bear reevaluation, all the way down to the local P.T.A., which organization it appears to me, spends far more of itself to raise money to send people to clinics in order to perpetuate itself than it does in joining the serious and vital questions of public education, curriculum, and the role of parents in the academic process.

No institution is immune: it's the way institutions are, and the concerned person faces three options. The least desirable is to tear the institution down: revolution: which naively assumes that new institutions will be less inclined to become established. The second option is to ignore the situation: stay at home and keep one's mouth shut in the equally naive assumption that the people who run the show know best. The third option is to jump in and work for reform - the most difficult and risky course of all: and to me, the only one that makes sense.

It is my conviction that Christians are called to that kind of activity in the world. We are the people who can remember, out of our own history, what happened to our Lord and the established institution of religion. We are the ones reminded that his conflict was not incidental, nor peripheral, but at the heart of his ministry - and that he was crucified because of it. We are the ones I believe - of all the people in society - whose job it is to keep insisting that our institutions function with integrity. John R. Fry, and others, are suggesting that Christian Faith makes a man a revolutionary because human institutions are corrupt. I disagree. That's too simple. Too

naive. But I do think Christian faith makes us skeptical in a healthy way - and involved in a personal way - in the institutions of our society - as "flies in the ointment". As the people with the courage and honesty to ask the right questions.

There is a still deeper significance to all of this because it sets personal discipleship to this Jesus Christ in the context of conflict. We're not very comfortable with that. The Church has often been one-sided about Jesus Christ, sensoing in him a Savior; one with power tosave men from the repercussions of their own sin. That is true and important and vital to the integrity of the Gospel. But there is more to it than that. Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord, and he places the people he saves in the life of the world, where his Lordship always has and always will, precipitate, more than a few conflicts.

Hence my difficulty with the easy piety of the church and the evangelistic approach of a Billy Graham. A man is saved by giving his life to Christ. But what does that really mean. Well, I would suggest that unless it places a man under the discipline of Christ's Lordship in the world - as well as under the assurance of his eternal love, it means absolutely nothing.

In a recent oral examination before one of the Presbyteries of the Synod of Indiana, a candidate for ordination was asked to explain his own experience of Jesus Christ. Now, these oral examinations are very important and it is very tempting to say what you think people want to hear. So this particular candidate told how he had come to know Jesus as his Savior and all the heads nodded. But then he went on to say that about a year later he had had another conversion experience - and this time he had come to know Jesus as his Lord. I think that is a powerful and honest reflection of the Gospel demand upon the individual. Christ is both Savior and Lord - and his Lordship is the point at which a lot of Christians want to get off the boat.

Jesus saw his own life in terms of obeying the will of God, even to the point of death. He saw that to do this he would have to empty out himself,

and live on the basis of an authority greater than his own. And that, I would suggest, is the deepest conflict of all. We don't want that. No man does. No man, in his right mind, wants to live under any authority or discipline other than his own.

It's a little like dying. And that is precisely the New Testament image for it. Paul, in his letters, talks about "dying to sin" or "dying to the law" - which means rejecting the religious law as the basis for living. Dietrick Bonhoeffer said it memorably when he wrote: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." [The Cost of Discipleship, p. 7] He realized that honest discipleship means the death of something intrinsic to me, and the replacement of that something with the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

That something is self - or ego - and Christian Faith has always defined sin, ultimately, as living out of, and for the sake of my own ego. Dr. H. Louis Patrick put it in simple terms: "Our sin lies not in the petty larceny of breaking God's laws, our sin comes from the basic treason hidden in the depths of our being where we deny God's right to rule. Sin is never first of all an act. It is always primarily an attitude that comes from the deepest parts of our being." [The Protestant Hour, July, 1970]

And William Lazareth addresses the churchman directly: "People have a right to know that when we invite them to become fellow disciples we are not merely offering them an emotional jag or an intellectual exercise, or a sure key to happiness and success. We are asking them, rather, to permit God to transform them and their entire existence from self-centeredness to God - centeredness, from self-worship to the worship of a crucified and risen Lord." [p. 38 R. A. Raines, Reshaping the Christian Life]

- To be transformed from self-centeredness to God - centeredness. That is the deepest conflict of all. And it is never done once and for all. Rather it is a process of transformation, a process of becoming a Christian, that takes place in the context of the events and transactions of daily living;

a process that is conscious insofar as I will to allow Jesus Christ to be the authority in my life.

We decide that deep down inside where we really live. We decide one way or another a hundred times every day. And we need to recall that for Jesus it was the way of a cross. As Lent approaches we need to remember that early in his ministry the storm began to gather; that the conflict implicit in his Lordship set in motion the process of crucifixion.

As Lent begins let us remember that. Let us look forward, also, and see that there is resurrection at the end of the road: that the way of the cross was validated by the Resurrection of the Risen Lord. As we are reminded in Lent that Jesus Christ is our Savior, let us accept him anew as Lord.

Amen.

Our father, grant us the courage to hold our own lives up to the white heat of your love. Give us grace to admit that we live for ourselves. And then help us, our father, to open our lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Savior.

Amen.